

Meeting the needs of Future Generations: Applying the principle of intergenerational equity to the 2015 processes on climate change and sustainable development

Introduction

In its simplest form international equity can be understood as fairness between generations. Growing inequality, extreme poverty and the threat of climate change bring into focus the fact that the actions (or inactions) of the present generation can jeopardise the rights and wellbeing of generations yet to be born. This hastens the need for responses that enhance equity between generations. Intergenerational equity is entirely consistent with a climate justice approach, which links human rights and development to achieve a human-centred approach, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly.

Several global processes converge in 2015 with the potential to re-orientate development to be more sustainable, inclusive, low carbon and resilient. The post 2015 Development Agenda will succeed the Millennium Development Goals and engage all countries in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This process will conclude in September 2105 and will be implemented around the world from January 2016. Meanwhile the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change will meet in Paris in December 2015 to adopt a universal and legally binding climate agreement. The commitments made under this agreement will enter into force from 2020 and aim to ensure that global temperature rise does not exceed 2°C above pre-industrial levels.

Intergenerational Equity, Sustainable Development and Climate Change

Within the sustainable development agenda and the climate change regime there is an inherent awareness of the needs of future generations. The 1987 Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Report) grounds the concept of sustainable development in intergenerational terms: *'Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.'* In Article 3 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) the international community recognises that climate change is fundamentally an intergenerational problem. Article 3 of the Convention commits Parties to *'protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind, on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities.'*

Although the principle of intergenerational equity is widely recognized in the international legal system in general and in the legal architecture concerned with climate change in particular, it is less clear what is required in practice to realise the principle and operationalise the concept.

Box 1: Intergenerational equity as a unifying theme in the context of climate action

The Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice considers intergenerational equity a unifying theme that connects developed and developing countries, young and old, to advocate for bold action on climate change. At a high level meeting co-hosted with the Polish Presidency of COP 19, in December 2013, participants emphasized the value of an intergenerational approach in informing actions taken to address climate change, and underscored the universal engagement of stakeholders implied by such an approach. Participants at the event highlighted the need to apply the principles that underpin intergenerational equity within the new climate agreement.

To read the Foundation’s report on the high-level leaders event in Warsaw, [click here](#)

Implementing Intergenerational Equity - A mix of parallel and complementary strategies

Incorporating the principles of intergenerational equity into the international processes taking shape in 2015 requires an approach that considers a combination of strategies - some specific to these processes and some to enhance the standing of intergenerational equity more broadly within international dialogue. Specific mechanisms to implement the principle of intergenerational equity in practice were considered in research¹ commissioned by the Mary Robinson Foundation – Climate Justice and assessed in terms of:

1. **effectiveness:** whether they effectively realise obligations to future generations; balance the interests of future generations with those of the present and protect the right to development of the poorest and most vulnerable people; and whether they distribute burdens equitably;
2. **political feasibility:** whether they are politically realistic and sustainable; and
3. **moral legitimacy:** whether they promote or violate other moral values (like procedural justice or democracy).

The research indicates that the implementation of the following four strategies would promote climate justice through application of the principle of intergenerational equity:

Commission for Future Generations at the International Level

The idea to create a commission or commissioner for future generations at the international level was first proposed by Edith Brown Weiss in 1989², was championed by Malta in the lead up to the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 and was again proposed in the lead up to Rio+ 20 in 2012³. The proposal for a High Commissioner for Future Generations was also explored in the 2013 Report of the United Nations Secretary General ‘*Intergenerational Solidarity and the Needs of Future Generations*’. However, to date none of these proposals have been translated into action.

An institutional body that gives voice to the interests of future generations, and whose specific role is to speak for those not yet born, can play an important role in informing long term policy making. Without such an agency, there is a significant risk that their needs will not be considered. A Commission

¹ Research carried out by Professor Simon Caney, Oxford.

² Brown Weiss, E. 1989. In *Fairness to Future Generations: International Law, Common Patrimony and Intergenerational Equity*.

³ See zero draft of *The Future We Want*, 2012.

for Future Generations⁴ would ensure that current decisions are examined from the perspective of the risks and opportunities they present in the long term, instilling a vision that is inherently intergenerational and mitigating against myopic policy making.

An intergenerational approach must not promote the needs of future generations of people in wealthy nations over the immediate needs of people in developing countries. For this reason a commission is preferable to a commissioner as a broader, regionally representative membership would enhance the likelihood that present-day contexts for poorer countries are taken into account in assessing long term risk. The effectiveness of the agency would be determined as much by the calibre of the office holders as by the formal powers of the commission.

Strengthening Youth Participation

Young people hold a legitimate interest in the outcome of ongoing negotiations in both the climate and development processes. Their concerns extend beyond the lifetimes of the negotiators, yet the climate and development negotiations will ultimately determine whether the world in which they live out their lives offers opportunities in terms of quality of life, personal safety and equity.

As a recognised civil society actor, the youth constituency has demonstrated its eagerness to participate in UN meetings on climate change and sustainable development and has actively championed issues of intergenerational equity and the rights of future generations. However it is important that this engagement is meaningful and available to young people from all countries. This requires the provision of support to enable young people in developing countries to be represented to a similar degree to their developed country counterparts. Effective youth engagement includes facilitation to input into high-level events, provision of technical support and the establishment of a review of youth participation in international negotiations.

Intergenerational equity informing indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

As the international community works to finalise the Sustainable Development Goals there will be a focus on defining indicators to assess their implementation at international and national level. The inclusion of indicators of intergenerational wellbeing could increase the quality of consideration given to the needs of future generations by present-day policy making.

Existing indexes such as the index for sustainable economic welfare⁵, explicitly try to combine intergenerational equity with equity within the current generation, by considering ecological sustainability. Others, like the Quebec Intergenerational Equity Index⁶ consider a broader composition of primary indices relating to youth income, government spending on essential services such as education and health, greenhouse gas emissions and unemployment. Others measure intergenerational equity in terms of disaster resilience and the age of government officials. To date intergenerational equity has not informed proposals on indicators for the SDGs⁷, however there is potential to build on existing indices to incorporate the needs of future generations at the international and / or the national level. The participation of a wide range of stakeholders, including young people in

⁴ Examples of national level initiatives exist, such as Israel's Commission for Future Generations and Finland's Committee for the Future.

⁵ A discussion on the theoretical foundation to support the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare by Lawn can be found in *Ecological Economics*, Volume 44, Issue 1.

⁶ Read more about the Quebec Intergenerational Equity Index [here](#).

⁷ See for example SDSN, Nov 2014, Working Draft *Indicators and a monitoring framework for Sustainable Development Goals*.

the design and monitoring of the full range of indicators could strengthen their effectiveness on monitoring outcomes for current and future generations.

Intergenerational equity can inform the design and review of national contributions to climate action

An equitable and ambitious international climate agreement is necessary if we are to preserve a stable climate system. As the Parties to the UNFCCC put forward their Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) to global climate action in the post 2020 period, these contributions will be informed and reviewed in terms of their adequacy and equity. The ambition of the 2015 agreement and of individual INDCs could be enhanced by including intergenerational equity in the framework for evaluating INDCs.

The Paris Agreement is expected to include measures to regularly review these national contributions to determine their adequacy and to strengthen commitment to staying as far below 2°C as possible, (which is hoped to be a safe level of warming for future generations). There is an opportunity to use intergenerational equity to inform both the design of INDCs at national level and the review mechanism for INDCs to be enshrined in the legal agreement. Intergenerational equity could be one factor used to assess the adequacy and fairness of national actions on mitigation, support and adaptation.

By incorporating an intergenerational lens it becomes clearer whether the proposed contributions are ambitious enough to avoid dangerous levels of climate change, and equitable in so far as they don't damage poor countries' development prospects or undermine the rights of future generations.

Conclusions

A range of actions are required at international level to apply the principle of intergenerational equity in practice. Ideally all of the strategies discussed above would be advanced in parallel for maximum effect, however no action is directly reliant on the other - so a lack of progress on one will not impede progress on another.

- A Commission on Future Generations could be established by the UN in the context of the implementation and review of the post 2015 development agenda.
- The participation of young people from all regions of the world should be facilitated throughout 2015 and beyond in the ongoing climate and development negotiations to maximise the benefits of the processes to future generations. The participation of young people in national processes can bring an intergenerational perspective to the design and implementation of sustainable development and climate actions.
- Intergenerational equity could increase the quality of consideration given to the needs of future generations in the design of international and national indicators for the SDGs.
- The 2015 climate agreement should include regular review and strengthening of national contributions to climate action, and the inclusion of intergenerational equity as a component of the review can serve to increase ambition.